

STATEMENT RE: BAGHOUZ STRIKE
Statement by Capt. Bill Urban, CENTCOM spokesman

In mid to late March of 2019, U.S., coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces had isolated the final remnants of the ISIS proclaimed territorial caliphate in Baghouz, Syria. The ISIS pocket included thousands of fighters and family members including women and children. The remaining fighters including some women and child combatants along with many ISIS family members, including some who were likely held against their will, decided to make a determined stand in an area that included buildings, tunnels and cliffs. Multiple entreaties to ISIS to allow family members to depart the area were rebuffed, and thousands of family members remained in the area of the fighting.

On March 18, 2019, five days before the end of the battle, as many as 200 hundred ISIS fighters launched a determined counterattack on SDF and coalition forces that started around 4 a.m. local time, lasted numerous hours and resulted in more than 30 SDF casualties. After more than 6 hours of fighting and dozens of strikes, numerous U.S. manned and unmanned strike platforms had departed the area due to having expended all of their ordinance. ISIS fighters had inflicted high casualties on the SDF through small arms, rocket propelled grenades, indirect fire, improvised explosive devices and suicide bombings.

After 10 a.m. local time, an SDF position under heavy fire and in danger of being overrun called for defensive airstrikes on ISIS fighter positions. The SDF fighters reported the area clear of civilians, and the nearest U.S. special operations forces on the ground also reported that they could observe no civilians in the area. The only remaining U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) in the area at the time of the strike was only capable of providing standard definition full motion video (FMV) as high definition-capable UAVs that were on station earlier had departed following the expenditure of their ordinance. The remaining U.S. UAV had also expended all of its hellfire missiles and was unarmed at the time of the call. The U.S. UAV on station was unable to discern any civilians in the area at the time of the SDF request. The only remaining armed strike aircraft on scene at the time of the request for air support was a U.S. F-15 with precision guided 500- and 2,000-pound bombs. With the area reported clear of civilians, and SDF positions under fire, the special operations strike cell authorized two defensive strikes on ISIS positions with two 2,000-pound precision guided munitions and one 500-pound precision guided munition from the F-15. The strikes were

determined to have taken out at least 16 active ISIS fighters that were engaged in attacks on SDF positions.

Several hours after these two strikes, a coalition UAV operator, who was operating a coalition UAV in the area with high-definition full motion video reported to U.S. special operations forces that the UAV had observed possible civilians in the area at the time of the strike. As the U.S. strike cell was unaware of the presence of the coalition UAV, U.S. special operations forces did not have access to their feed at the time of the strike. In response to this report, U.S. special operations forces leaders initiated a civilian casualty credibility assessment which determined that the report of civilian casualties was credible and warranted a 15-6 investigation.

The civilian casualty credibility assessment and the 15-6 determined through the study of all available evidence including coalition high-definition video, that several locations unobserved by the U.S. UAV with men, women, and children likely received lethal effects from the strikes. The investigations concluded that at least 4 civilians were killed and 8 were wounded from these strikes. The investigations were unable to conclusively characterize the status of more than 60 other casualties that resulted from these strikes. The reason for this uncertainty is that multiple armed women and at least one armed child were observed in the video, and the exact mixture of armed and unarmed personnel could not be conclusively determined. Likely, a majority of those killed were also combatants at the time of the strike, however, it is also highly likely that there were additional civilians killed by these two strikes.

The 15-6 investigation concluded that these two strikes were legitimate self-defense strikes in support of SDF forces under fire, that they were proportional due to the unavailability of smaller ordinance at the time of the request, and that appropriate steps were taken to rule out the presence of civilians at the time of the strike. To prevent unintended casualties in the future, the investigation recommended requiring high-definition video for similar strikes in the future, and the requirement for the strike cell to coordinate with any coalition surveillance assets in the area at the time of the strike, and those recommendations were implemented. Finally, in accordance with the findings, the investigating officer determined that no disciplinary actions were warranted.

We abhor the loss of innocent life and take all possible measures to prevent them. In this case, we self-reported and investigated the strike according to our own evidence and take full responsibility for the unintended loss of life. It

is important to understand that ISIS decided to put their own families at risk when all avenues of escape were afforded to them. It is also important to note that some women and children, whether through indoctrination or choice, decided to take up arms in this battle and as such could not strictly be classified as civilians. Ultimately, the determined effort of U.S., coalition and SDF forces culminated the final territorial defeat of ISIS on March 23, 2019, but it did not come without a significant cost of U.S. and partner casualties or without the regrettable loss of civilian life.